

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 180 298

HE 011 971

AUTHOR Salovesh, Michael
 TITLE Descent into the Maelstrom: Anthropology in the Politics of Academe.
 PUB DATE Nov 78
 NOTE 22p.: Paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting (Los Angeles, CA, November 14-18, 1978)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Administrative Organization: *Anthropology: *College Faculty: College Majors: Curriculum: *Departments: Enrollment Rate: Faculty College Relationship: Faculty Workload: *Governance: Higher Education: Personnel Policy: Political Influences: *Power Structure

ABSTRACT

Conditions in academic employment associated with increasingly tense political struggles for anthropology departments are discussed. Personnel policies for state-supported institutions are cited as areas of major controversy and the effect of student enrollments on the setting of staffing-level parameters is emphasized. Politics internal to academic departments of anthropology are discussed and various models of university power structures are described. It is suggested that anthropology departments, usually one of a university's smallest departments, face great difficulties in maintaining their academic independence. Recommendations for anthropology departments include: using temporary faculty appointments rather than tenure-track appointments; encouraging anthropology faculty to gain decision-making or influential posts not usually seen as department-linked; and emphasizing the interdepartmental links in the field of anthropology. It is suggested that steps should be taken to face the specter of unemployment threatening the field of anthropology. (Author/SF)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

DESCENT INTO THE MAELSTROM:

ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE POLITICS OF ACADEME

BY: MICHAEL SALOVESH

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

DE KALB, IL 60115

A paper in the symposium, "The Anthropology of Anthropology"

Barbara Frankel, Lehigh University, Organizer and Chair

1978 Annual Meeting, American Anthropological Association

Los Angeles, California 14-18 November 1978

NOTE: The present version of this paper was prepared for oral presentation. Scholarly apparatus, such as references to the growing literature in the field, is not appropriate to such a format. Please regard this as a preliminary version. Your comments and suggestions will be welcomed.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Michael
Salovesh

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ABSTRACT

The crisis in academic employment is associated with increasingly tense political struggles between and among disciplines and departments in many universities. Separate but overlapping arenas where these struggles are acted out include, among others, personnel policies and curriculum affairs. This paper examines how anthropology departments, considered as solidary groups, face differing pressures toward conflict and coalition with other groups in these arenas.

The charter for this paper is found in a paraphrase of the Communist Manifesto: *A specter is haunting anthropology--the specter of unemployment. All the powers of old anthropology have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this specter: committees on alternative employment and Executive Boards, students and faculty, the fortunate who are "established" and the dedicated disestablishmentarians. . . . It is high time that anthropologists should openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims, their tendencies, and meet this specter of unemployment with objective analysis of the profession itself.*

Why do I begin a paper on the political position of anthropology within the halls of academe by invoking a specter? First and foremost, of course, because that specter has moved out of our nightmares into present reality. But our interests as anthropologists should go beyond attempts to guarantee survival; because we are anthropologists, we have the tools needed to gain an understanding of what's happening to our profession. What we have lacked is the will to study ourselves as we have so freely studied others. Our crisis in academic employment may provide the stimulus that simple professional curiosity has not.

In recent years, it has become abundantly clear that we have allowed ourselves to become dwellers in academic ivory towers. We academic anthropologists, *Newsletter* after *Newsletter* tell us, are woefully ignorant of the realities of non-academic employment.

That should come as no surprise: by definition, teaching anthropologists have chosen academia as the "proper" arena in which to seek our rewards. Studies of our own profession and the milieu where it is practiced have been viewed as less than urgent. Like sex, the subject is too embarrassing to discuss in front of our progeny. We sustain ourselves on the hope that whatever our offspring pick up in locker rooms or on the street won't be too far wrong, and we pray that they'll avoid both infection and abortion as they grow up in the profession. So we nurse each generation on fables of academic collegiality, we wean them on tales of tenure being virtue's own reward, we school them in the belief that knowledge and scholarship are what universities are about, and we suffer with them as each academic generation undergoes its own adolescent identity crisis in the face of cruel academic reality.

One paper in a symposium can't bring us out of that closet. Together with others in this symposium, all I propose to do is to start opening the door. My focus in this paper will be on a "middle level" of academic politics: the arenas in which anthropology departments interact with other academic groups in the internal political systems of some state-supported universities in the U.S.¹ I concentrate on academic politics because of two dicta once proposed by a wise friend: "The first law of academia is that questions of educational and scholarly substance become

political questions at the earliest possible opportunity. The second law is that once a substantive matter has become a political question, nobody will ever give serious consideration to its educational and scholarly merits."

Why look at politics on a middle level, not elsewhere? Because "high politics"--that is, the kinds of politics that characterize state legislatures, budgetary commissions, or university governing boards--rarely deals with anthropology as such. Instead, it deals with matters that affect all departments within a university more or less equally. What's more, we as anthropologists have even less to do with the politicians on high than they do with us. Politics at the state level is well worth studying; ask any political scientist. But such high-level politics is best viewed as one of the givens of our existence, rather than as a fit subject for the anthropology of anthropology.

As for the "low politics" internal to academic departments of anthropology, it is unfortunately true that only an insider could possibly come to grips with what we do to each other. Any sane outside observer would have to conclude that our internal struggles are beyond belief, let alone understanding. Curious and interesting things do happen in the internal politics of anthropology departments. But while they are happening, every anthropologist within shouting distance is too involved as a participant to have anything left over for dispassionate observation.

At the middle level of academic politics, it's possible, albeit difficult, to maintain a reasonable balance between participation and observation. In the arenas of such a middle level, we can view the anthropology department as a solidary corporate body seeking, through alliance and opposition, principle and compromise, authority and influence, to advance its own interests by political means. Other participants in those same arenas are by no means limited to academic departments. The lines of political struggle separate and unite administrators and faculty; organizations built on the model of industrial unions and others that view themselves as professional associations; locally-oriented individuals whose universe is coterminous with their own university and cosmopolitans barely willing to admit the existence of the university they inhabit; those who see themselves as representatives of Science and those who think they might be of the humanities; and, again and again, academic departments and their representatives. This is a truly complex array of forces and actors.

The arenas where the games of academic politics are played take many different kinds of surface forms. From the perspective of a departmental faculty, the most important continuum along which these forms might be ranged concerns variations in the locus of governing power. One end of such a continuum is the bogey-man model of a completely authoritarian, sectarian college where all

decisions are made by a president functioning as cardinal archbishop. At the other end stands an equally fictional kind of university in which the faculty is the only management. (Recent court action holds that Yeshiva University is like that. But that is a legal fiction.) I'm not sure how useful a continuum model of variations in governance would be. As an incurable lumpster rather than splitter, I prefer to look at and analyze similar situations which recur in all universities. For the purposes of this paper, then, I shall ignore variations in specific forms of university governance in order to deal with a deeper kind of structure that sets arenas of political interaction no matter what surface form of governance is followed.

I must put an immediate limitation on the kinds of arenas to be considered, lest I bite off more than anyone can chew. Every university is a multi-ringed circus of political arenas--and the clowns of one ring are simultaneously the jugglers of another and the stars of a balancing act elsewhere. Keeping tight focus on one or two arenas raises the risk that great and significant acts going on elsewhere will be missed, but at least there's a chance to see something significant when it does happen in the arenas of concentration. For this paper, one arena of concentration must be the concatenation of forces influencing personnel policy, the bread and butter decisions about who will be hired and who will be fired once a legislature or a governing board have set the

parameters of staffing levels. In the realities of state-supported institutions (and the overwhelming majority of academic anthropologists work in such places), enrollment shifts are a major factor influencing shifting personnel policies. Student enrollments are subject to many influences outside a university: the employment market, economic and political trends, even simple shifts in taste and fashion. But internal processes within a university can amplify or diminish the effects of these outside trends. The arenas where these processes come to bear are found in curriculum decisions, particularly those regarding which courses shall be required of all, some, or no students enrolled at the university. Thus I shall take curriculum decisions as the second kind of arena on which to focus some attention here. The interaction of staffing levels and curriculum decisions here will have to stand for many other kinds of political interactions affecting anthropologists. There is simply no room to go farther afield in this paper; I hope others will later examine some of the many remaining arenas of middle-level university politics.

The view of politics to be taken here concentrates on how decisions are shaped, rather than on who makes the decisions; on influence rather than authority. A major explanatory variable in such a view is the size and solidarity of the support group aligned behind a particular choice of policy direction. Practical gamesmanship (and, ultimately, political theory as well) shows

that policy decisions usually reduce themselves to binary choices: yes or no, policy number one or policy number two. Other alternatives may come up along the road to decision-making, but final choices always are tantamount to binary choices. In the academic setting, a peculiar kind of majority rules even in highly autocratic structures. That majority is not necessarily the numerical majority of those affected by the decision, or even a numerical majority of those charged with making the decision. It is, instead, the largest solidary group with the strongest continuing interests affected by a particular decision that usually prevails. Such a "majority" may be outnumbered on particular votes, if these are taken. The solidarity of such a group, always based on a continuing solidarity of interests, gives it long-range control in the face of a succession of opposing numerical majorities based on temporary mutual interests.

Anthropology departments are numerically small, in comparison with other academic departments, in U.S. public universities. (When anthropology is part of a combined department, whether that department is one of sociology and anthropology, social relations, social science, or other variants, anthropology is almost always a departmental minority. As a result, anthropology as such doesn't even get the chance to enter middle-level political arenas from a base in a combined department.) There is, therefore, a strong tendency for the solidary interests of an anthropology department

to lose out in middle-level political arenas. Of course, even a paranoid has real enemies, but it is not necessary to posit a cannibalistic conspiracy on the part of other departments to explain such losses. Numbers alone are all but a sufficient explanation.

The concrete case of my own university will show how this works. (It is not greatly different in these matters from the average for state-supported universities.) Anthropology is the smallest of seventeen departments in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, one of five colleges in the university. Each department elects a representative to the College Council; the chairperson of each department is ex officio a member of the College Senate. The College Council is, largely, a personnel review board charged with developing college personnel policies and acting on recommendations for promotion, tenure, retention, salary increments, sabbaticals, and some research proposals. A college Curriculum Committee (containing six elected members) acts on course proposals, degree programs, and similar matters. Above the college, there is a University Council, a University Personnel Committee, a Graduate Council, a University Council on Instruction (curriculum committee), and other bodies of elected faculty members. Seats are reserved on all of these university-level bodies for Liberal Arts faculty members. In its entire history, anthropology has never had a representative on the College

Curriculum Committee or any university-level council or committee. One anthropologist, by virtue of receiving the highest number of votes of any losing candidate for the University Council, once served a year as alternative member of that body. The largest departments of the college, History, English, Political Science, and Mathematics, usually have representatives on nearly all university-level bodies charged with decision-making. A candidate from anthropology simply has no chance against a candidate from a department with five times as many faculty members, in a context where departmental interests take precedence.

But why should I assume that departmental interests take precedence in the election of members of university-wide bodies? In the specific setting I have described, and in the similar and parallel situations that obtain in most universities, the answer can be provided by consideration of a recurring scenario. Enrollments, I have suggested, are a major factor in the internal allocation of resources in publicly supported universities. Within a university, the only decisions in the university's control that may affect the internal distribution of enrollments are changes in those requirements variously labeled "distribution" or "general education" or "liberal arts" requirements. These requirements specify that students must take a certain number of courses or semester hours in specified kinds of courses. Consider two possible kinds of situations that may result from such requirements:

first, cases in which the effect of the requirement on a given department is the development of a comparatively high student/faculty ratio; second, cases where such a requirement leads to comparatively low student/faculty ratios in a given department. (The usual label for such student/faculty ratios is "FTE", derived from the long-winded "ratio of weighted student credit hours to full-time equivalent [F.T.E.] faculty members".)

High FTE's can occur in departments of any size. Their effects on decision-making processes, however, can vary markedly according to the size of the department receiving the high registrations. All other things being equal, a large department can usually convert high or increasing FTE into a solid justification for adding faculty members--or retaining them in the face of a general staff reduction. These ends are accomplished through the activities of the department's representatives serving in the councils which affect personnel allocations; large departments tend to have strong representation on such councils because of their size as voting blocs. Small departments will offer the same arguments in favor of adding to their staffs when the FTE numbers are on their side, of course; but in school after school the reports I get say that high FTE's seldom seem to be translated into departmental growth for small departments. A much more likely outcome, sadly enough, takes place in the curriculum arena. There, the small department with high FTE's is likely to find

itself squeezed out of the general requirements laid down for all students. The arguments for such an outcome are usually one-sided, since small departments tend to have little influence in setting general curricula. The arguments used have a kind of surface rationality. They run to either or both of the following: "Look, these poor guys are swamped with an overload of students. They would probably prefer to be more of a professional and less of a service department, anyway, and their enrollments show that they can probably afford to stand on their own professional merits. Let's lift the burden by dropping general anthropology from the list of courses approved for required social science credit." Alternatively, it might be argued that "after all, we ought to be allowing students more room for vocational preparation in their own majors. For the general run of students, anthro isn't really relevant anyhow; of what use is it to a business major, or a political scientist, to know anything about fossils and all that?" The result is that a small department with a high FTE loses favored status in the general curriculum. The large department with a high FTE does not face this threat because it elects those who will protect it.

Low FTE's have a mirror effect on the departments that suffer them. A large department with low registrations can convert its enrollment position into a strong argument that requirements in its field should be increased. Sometimes this may even be overtly

expressed as a means of "maintaining the high quality of a department that has stood the test of time." A small department with the same kind of enrollment problem can say all it wants about how its enrollment position is a direct consequence of curriculum requirements, but it is unlikely to make the argument stick in the curriculum arena. Low FTE will be adjusted, however; in these days of budgetary constraint, it always is. The way the question is handled for small departments is by reductions in staff. Tenure is not granted to probationary faculty members; those on research or sabbatical leaves are not replaced, even with temporary staff; and teaching assistantships disappear. Beyond a certain point, the process of decline becomes a negative feedback loop: as a department loses members, it becomes more and more difficult to offer a balanced departmental program for majors. Those who know they want to be anthropologists go elsewhere. Lessening contact with prospective majors who might be recruited through once-required courses leads to further enrollment declines among majors. And, as usual, the problem is handled through further cutbacks in staff. In short, the large department handles low FTE by getting more favored treatment in required curricula while the small department loses staff "because" of low FTE.

If what I have just said were the whole picture, then we could expect the imminent collapse of anthropology as a separate academic discipline. Despite the painful events at the City

University of New York within recent memory, anthropology has not faced widespread extinction. Clearly there have been other factors at work in the political games I have been describing. It's not just a simple pattern of predictable relationships among faculty size, FTE enrollment, and course requirements that has been determining our fate.

Remembering the "laws of academia" I cited earlier, if anthropology survives it is not because of the educational or scholarly merits of our discipline. It is because of political activity. What, then, are the political levers we can and do push to insure our survival in a hostile environment?

A shift of contexts provides one mechanism anthropology departments have used repeatedly to gain their ends in arenas where the odds apparently are stacked against them. I have shown that anthropology can expect to lose when political contests are framed in terms of the interests of departments, acting as such. All too often, anthropology is the small department brushed aside by the giants. But if the same questions of personnel or curriculum policy are posed anew, in ways that bring other interests than those of departments acting as such into play, then there is room for leverage to be applied in anthropology's favor. This is almost always a covert game, where the survival interests of a department are cloaked in the rhetoric of gaining ends desired by those who have no interest in anthropology's survival.

Suppose, for example, that a small anthropology department needs to add a tenured or tenure-track faculty member, in order to assure continuity of departmental programming in, say, linguistic anthropology. The advantage to the anthropology department is clear. But if the battle is joined on that issue, anthropology will usually lose. The alternative is for anthropology--or some anthropologists--to pose the struggle in different terms entirely. "Faculty rights", rather than departmental needs, is a much surer road to success in such a case. There are few tenured faculty members anywhere who would openly oppose the tenure system, and tenured faculty members are the ones who usually hold controlling positions in most decision-making arenas within universities. So it is frequently the case that anthropology, or any small department, serves its own ends by entering the lists on the side of liberalizing tenure requirements for all faculty. Or, when that is impossible, by fighting to minimize the evasion of ordinary tenure decisions through the use of temporary appointments rather than tenure-track appointments.

Another way to shift contexts is for individual anthropologists to gain decision-making or influential posts that are not usually seen as departmentally linked. The most typical arena in which we seek such posts is provided by faculty unions or their equivalents. Anthropologists, and social scientists in general, are well known to be in the forefront of collective bargaining

efforts on many, if not most, campuses. (Agriculture, engineering, and business faculties are hindmost in support for unionism, and this is not accidental either.) I submit that the high participation in union-building and other collective all-faculty efforts by anthropologists is more than mere altruism. To a very large extent, much of this activity is a useful survival mechanism for anthropology as a profession and as an academic discipline.

Our most basic survival technique, however, is the use of political alliance. Here anthropology is in a virtually unique position among academic disciplines. The very nature of our work creates many situations in which other departments have strong reason for supporting anthropology's continuation. At most schools, for example, English departments find it awkward to keep linguists on their own staffs in sufficient numbers to serve their own departmental needs. A linguistic anthropologist nicely takes up the slack. Physical anthropologists can serve a parallel function for biological science programs or medical schools. Archaeologists specializing in the Paleolithic fill out geology programs through their special knowledge of the Pleistocene. An Anthropologist who has done fieldwork in Latin America can supplement programs in bilingual/bicultural education, history, political science, Romance languages and literatures, international relations, and on and on. Those who have worked in other world areas have similar potential. From the internal perspective of an anthropology

department, these services to programs in other departments may well be considered peripheral functions. When it comes to academic politics, however, these anthropologically peripheral functions often turn out to be anthropology's main line of defense. In the cases just given anthropology's services to English or history or biology or geology can become so important to those other departments that they are almost forced to support us in order to serve their own central needs.

Our profession has always prided itself on its bridging and mediating functions between and among the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. These links provide some basis for alliance with other departments. Such alliances are inevitably weaker than those that tie anthropology into dyadic interdependencies with single departments, however. In a sense, every academic department operates in a world of limited good--and the operational model followed by most departments often approximates one of amoral familism. From time to time, it becomes possible to invoke allegiances to a greater "family" (for example, "we social scientists"), but competition and opposition within such broader coalitions can be just as salient as the possible grounds for alliance and cooperation. Success is more likely to follow on the organic solidarity of interlocking program needs than on the mechanical solidarity of an ideological collectivity. Luckily for us, anthropology's natural bent for academic polygamy gives

our departments entry as affinals to a wide series of families. Even if each departmental family must be amorally familistic for purposes of its own survival, our position as in-laws to many of the competing interests in the arenas of middle-level academic politics carries with it a dependable source of built-in protection.

At this point I don't know whether I have painted a picture of undue pessimism or one of unsupported optimism. What I wanted to do in this paper was to begin an open and overt consideration of the structural facts that set the limits on, and provide the opportunities for, what anthropology can and must do within the politics of academe. To return to where I began, it certainly is high time that we face up to the specter of unemployment by conscious and objective analysis of the external realities in which our profession must operate.²

NOTES

¹Field data on which this paper is based were obtained through participant observation as a faculty member at state-supported universities in three midwestern states. The field data are supplemented by interviews and exchanges with anthropologists currently or formerly employed at other state-supported universities, and by documentary and other materials supplied by three national organizations which function as faculty unions. To help the reader assess just where this participant has been doing his observation, so as to help judge one aspect of the possible validity of my conclusions, let me specify the positions in which I have participated and from which I have observed over the last four years: member, departmental personnel committee; chair, departmental curriculum committee; member, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Council Planning and Budget Committee and Personnel Committee; alternate member, University Council; Vice President, local chapters of AAUP, AFT, and IAHE (NEA); faculty union liaison representative to the Illinois Board of Regents; lobbyist (and occasional "expert" witness) on matters affecting higher education at the Illinois General Assembly. And, above all, a member of the faculty of the Department of Anthropology.

²It was only when I completed this paper that I fully realized how much it owes to the students of Anthropology 426, Political

Anthropology, a course given at Northern Illinois University in the fall of 1977. Nominally, I was supposed to be in charge of teaching that course; actually, all of us who were involved in it taught each other. The student decision to test our understanding of political theories by applying them to the empirical facts of how our university is run led me to the analysis presented here.